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Juvenile Hall is turning out some STAR graduates

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Kurt Christopher, a special-education teacher at Juvenile Hall, talked to a teen new to the program that helps detainees earn a GED certificate. (Laura Embry / Union-Tribune) -

SAN DIEGO — At 17 and locked up in Juvenile Hall, Abdi had given up on a high school diploma.

Like many of the young men who spend their teenage years in and out of jail, Abdi had stopped caring about school and anticipated a bleak life.

Then a probation officer offered Abdi the chance to rewrite his future, and the teen rose to the challenge.

Abdi is one of 86 boys and girls to earn a GED credential so far this school year while serving time in Juvenile Hall. A General Educational Development credential is considered to be a high school equivalency certificate.

That compares with 10 GEDs and six high school diplomas earned at Juvenile Hall in the previous two school years combined.

The pilot program Students Taking Academic Responsibility, or STAR, gives eligible detainees the tools and encouragement to pass the GED tests and then enroll in college courses online.

Educators and probation officers say the program's success has been astonishing in its first year. They say the students experience a rare taste of academic triumph and become less likely to “re-offend” as an adult.

Since the STAR program was launched last February, 109 youths have taken the GED tests and 91 have earned the certificate.

“We sat on their side and guided them, but they worked for it,” said Joe Naradzay, a school counselor for the county's Office of Education who helped brainstorm the program.

The educators beam over success stories such as Abdi, who is now taking college classes in Denver with hopes of one day going to medical school.

“My life was going nowhere,” said Abdi, 18, who did three stints in Juvenile Hall for family violence and probation violations. “I wanted someone to believe in me.”

The San Diego Union-Tribune agreed not to publish the last names of juveniles because by law, their criminal records are private.

The idea for the STAR program came about during a hallway discussion among Naradzay, probation officer Matt McKnight and special-education teacher Kurt Christopher.

“We were seeing the same kids, same faces, same stories over and over,” said McKnight, who is responsible for 29 17-year-old boys in Juvenile Hall's Unit 100.

Although all youths in custody attend school during their stay, many weren't earning enough credits toward a high school diploma, and others had specific learning needs.

Providing these students with a course specifically designed to pass the GED tests seemed like a plausible alternative. But they would have to do it in about 21 days – the average stay of a juvenile inmate at the facility.

Last February, the first group of 15 boys from Unit 100 signed academic and behavioral contracts to participate in the STAR program and began to study.

Slowly, a transformation came over the unit. Boys were staying up late to do homework and asking probation officers for help on math problems. Fights were down. Youths in other units were asking how to get into Unit 100.

“We made them feel responsible, and it's rubbed off on other students,” McKnight said. “It's reflected

directly in the behavior in the unit. These kids are walking around with their heads up high.”

Stephen, a 17-year-old working toward his GED certificate, described the unit as special.

“There's less drama, less disobedience,” Stephen said. “There's zero tolerance for a lot of things.”

Only three students have been kicked out of the STAR program so far, one of whom was able to beg his way back in. Another student, about to be released from Juvenile Hall, even implored a judge to let him stay in until he had finished the program.

After getting their GED credentials, the students enroll in community college and begin taking classes online.

At first, probation officers and teachers dug into their own pockets to pay for the college classes; now college grants pay for them. Vendors donate the textbooks.

Similar GED studies have been made available to girls in the neighboring facility, and officials hope to replicate the program in the county's other youth offender camps.

Stephen, who is on his third stay at Juvenile Hall, said the STAR program has given him something positive to focus on.

“Regular school was too fast-paced for me, and since I was behind, I wouldn't pay attention,” he said. “But since I've been locked up, I started caring about school.

“I'm thinking more about my future and I'm thinking outside the box now, thanks to the staff.” Stephen said he hopes to use his GED certificate to join the Marines and eventually go to college.

Several studies over the years have suggested a direct link between a youth offender's education level and recidivism. Of the 75 students in the Kearny Mesa program who earned their GED credentials and have been released, only two have been arrested on new offenses to date, probation officials said.

“We teach them that if you work hard, you can get anything you want,” special-education teacher Christopher said.

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